

12-19-69

"The Communications Explosion"  
An Address by Harry C. Thompson, Publisher, Newsweek Magazine  
Ohio State University Commencement, December 19, 1969

In considering what should be the nature of my remarks today, I have done some research. First, I talked with my son who graduates from college next spring -- and asked his advice. It was a simple, "Don't." With this counsel ringing in my ears, I accepted your kind invitation to speak today. For me, it's an awesome occasion and a great honor.

As far as topic, that was easy. I do not want to -- and cannot -- try to close the generation gap. Others can better carve the words in stone to commemorate your forthcoming centennial. And what more can I say about your football team? My business is communications.

So if you will, I'd like to take you on a short tour of communications hardware that will be yours to cope with in the near- to mid-term future. Then, after this short look into the future, I'd like to voice some conventional wisdom of the late, late Sixties regarding communications, in the hopes that it will have relevance to you in the Seventies and Eighties.

For no matter who you are or why you are, or what you may aspire to be, you are about to be assailed by, take part in, and perhaps be responsible for an even greater avalanche of communications than we have today -- for better or for worse.

Many of these devices are not unfamiliar to Ohio State which has pioneered in advanced teaching aids. I'm thinking of such ordinary staples as the data-phone, the teletype, the computer, the copier, television, magnetic tape and microfilm equipment. A little farther down the pike are the newer inventions

involving photo-composition, electrostatics, xerography, holography, micro-waves, satellites, and lasers. And there are dozens of refinements and combinations planned or already ready: computer-driven microfilm to store and retrieve trillions of information pieces ... an electronic video recorder attached to your television set that will reproduce images in black and white or color ... Homefax, a device using TV channels, to convert electromagnetic signals into copy and reproduce a "telepaper" ... facsimile systems, such as long distance xerography, that can reproduce and transmit -- instantly and simultaneously -- newspapers and magazines from city to city and country to country.

The "experts" -- the seers of the future -- abound. One predicts that within ten years consumers will have home-communications centers -- each a network of equipment, including a computer and a picture telephone which, hooked together, will revolutionize information retrieval data. At the same time, he sees -- within ten years -- the use of half a million electronic facsimile systems to reproduce anything printed -- satellite broadcasting direct to home receivers within four years.

Another seer contemplates a menage à trois: the computer, television and a printer providing information tailored to individual interests -- say, business news forty percent, general news thirty percent, sports twenty percent -- in effect, a personalized electronic journal.

On still another front the growth of cable TV is inspiring a host of ideas for specialized transmission services into so-called "wired cities" -- ideas such as the facsimile home newspaper with different news items sponsored by different advertisers ... educational services featuring courses, lectures,



and research ... a home retailing service featuring merchandise displays ... an entertainment service featuring prerecorded plays and movies available when the viewer wants them ... a home library reference service, and so on. In effect, the cable -- capable of carrying multiple color and black and white telecasts, FM broadcasts, and signals for facsimile and other input/output devices simultaneously -- could turn out to be the all-purpose interconnection for the computer-based home, business, and school information services of the future.

What will happen to conventional publishers? One market researcher believes they will enter the video-recording business and distribute their information on taped TV. Maybe so, but among my contemporaries in publishing, most believe that the new technology will only affect publishing in terms of what is printed, where it is printed and how it is printed.

However, believe what you will. The fact is that present technology can provide most any of these systems right now. The hangup is entrepreneurial -- that is, how to devise an economic structure in terms of whom to reward and how to reward them. At present, advertisers support TV to the tune of \$3.2 billion a year, spend over \$5 billion in newspapers and \$1.3 billion in magazines. Consumers spend \$6.5 billion to buy and service their television sets and \$5.9 billion to purchase books, magazines, and newspapers.

Will all these expenditures change or shift in the new information media? Will the money to make the system work come from taxes, subscriptions or advertising? How can the publisher or writer who supplies material to the information bank from which the user draws be compensated? Should information banks be free or should receiving sets have meters? Ought there to be a toll

system that charges the user for only the material he selects? These, of course, are formidable questions that you will have to answer.

But, in reality, those will be the easy answers determined largely by money and preference. The question I really don't envy you is: What good will all this communications hardware be if you cannot communicate with one another?

For it is already apparent that what we do not need is merely more communications, but rather communication that is more thoughtful and thought-provoking.

And to achieve this we must go not to the black box but rather the gray box -- the one that you have just spent a number of years tuning up.

Sad to say, at this very moment when man has reached the pinnacle of his technological prowess -- at the very moment when no scientific feat seems beyond his reach (even Mars) -- at this very moment man, it appears, is less able than ever to control his own affairs.

As we look around us, we see the world in disarray. Our society is divided, and the divisions continue to widen between the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the literate and the illiterate, the North and the South, uptown and downtown -- yes, the government and its people or at least large parts thereof.

Many of us have a nagging -- sometimes desperate -- feeling that there is something radically wrong with our communications. Whatever you call it -- the generation gap, the urban crisis, the technological trauma -- men stand on opposite sides of a chasm, and as Osborn Elliott, Newsweek's editor-in-chief, puts it, "yodel incomprehensible slogans at each other -- words that bounce and



echo through the canyon that are not really heard on the other side."

With information compounding geometrically and with the speed of communications reaching a point where it defies human absorption, the need for men and women competent to manage or to absorb the communications of the future -- and I don't mean 1984, I mean 1974 -- is absolutely imperative. Whether you like it or not that's you.

For only through effective communications will you be able to establish a rational rapport with the generations that preceded you (me) and, in many cases, the minds of your peers. With the improvement and perfection of some of the communication tools that I spoke of earlier, you have the greatest opportunity in history -- in my view -- to right what is wrong, to bring to an end the discord that is polarizing this and other nations, and to close the generation gap that is opening right now between you and another generation that is following you closely. Look over your shoulder!

The time has come for men and women of good will of all ages to join together to put these incredible technological advances to work for people.

One of your generation -- Mark Gerzon, Harvard '70 and author of The Whole World is Watching -- puts it this way, "This generation manifests a lesser concern for technology and a greater concern for man, technology's inventor. The young today are not entranced by what technology does for man and so can better observe what it does to man."

With a command of the new communications, you will -- I hope -- speak to each other ... listen to each other ... hear each other on how to preserve our environment ... how to cope with deteriorating transportation ... how to save

our cities ... how to wage peace ... how to help the needy ... how to recognize hypocrisy ... how to live with your neighbor ... how to restore dignity to man.

With a command of the new communications, you will seek out that thought from a 1947 Commission on Freedom of the Press. It observed that the major mission of mass communication is to raise social conflict "from the plane of violence to the plane of discussion."

But along with this command of the new communications, you will maintain I hope your healthy skepticism, your readiness to dissent, your respect for the truth, your love for the beautiful. And I would hope that you would put aside anti-intellectualism, impersonality, isolation, conformity, resignation, cynicism, and suspicion.

In conclusion, as I wish you the best, I would like to quote from a member of this country's earliest establishment who said 100 years before the founding of Ohio State: "Abuses of the freedom of speech ought to be repressed, but to whom dare we commit the power of doing it?" His name was Benjamin Franklin. My generation -- though often tempted by men of great persuasion or in high office to commit this power -- never did so. May yours never do so either.

Thank you.